

“Where Do We Go From Here?”

by

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How important is it for you to know your heritage—the land of your ancestors? An October 19, 2006, article in *The Washington Post* by Darryl Fears entitled, “Out of Africa—but From Which Tribe?” reminds us that it is possible to trace our family roots genetically. There are now multiple U.S. companies that can match your DNA with predominant groups in villages and nations around the world, including Africa.

For Black Americans, who were stripped of links to their homelands nearly 400 years ago, this genealogical linking using DNA is a godsend. Many believe that it is critical that they know their origins. I agree wholeheartedly. But in every silver lining, there is the possibility of cloud.

What could be worrisome about Black Americans identifying their African tribes? It depends. To the extent that knowledge of who and what you are provides psychological roots, a sense of connectedness and wellbeing, and a base from which to grow and be strong, then having this knowledge is not worrisome at all. However, if such knowledge serves as a basis for hatred and wide-spread animus toward those who disconnected Blacks from their African heritage, then having this knowledge can be deleterious.

Life is about moving forward perpetually and growing continuously from a strong base. One cannot plan or execute such a growth path when significant amounts of energy are dedicated to anger and hatred. Rather, knowledge about one’s origin is a critical source of information about not only where one is from physically, but also about one’s ancestors, and, most importantly, it completes the story of how one came to be in the present state. The latter knowledge should help ensure that the evil and misfortunes of the past can never lay claim to, or be repeated in, the future.

The more Black Americans come to know about the origins and tragedy of slavery, the greater will be the tendency to become infuriated with the parties to this history. Hatred is not the answer to our future.

What is the answer to our future? You and your posterity will determine that. However, let me suggest that knowledge of our genealogical links to Africa should not be allowed to contribute to the creeping fragmentation of America. Recently, two Brookings Institution authors, James D. Hunter and Alan Wolfe, released a book entitled, *Is There A Culture War? A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life*. While these authors write about political, religious, and social fragmentation, we must also be very concerned about the deep divide in America being engendered by ethnic fragmentation. Ethnic fragmentation brings with it adverse political, cultural, and economic consequences, which can tear America apart.

If Black Americans wish to reap richly deserved benefits from 400 years as key contributors to building America, then we should be careful not to cause its disintegration. As long as there is

hope that Blacks will be accepted fully, not marginally, under the American umbrella of peace and prosperity, then Blacks should follow this course.

Clearly, Blacks still have work to do in resolving our schizophrenia over our place in America—fully integrated in versus continuing as a “nation within a nation.” Some may argue that this is partly outside of our purview because the larger society must decide whether it is willing to accept the Black America that it created. An alternate view is that Blacks insist on their rightful role as an integral force in shaping America’s future. Irrespective of these considerations, Black Americans must move forward as circumstances unfold. Let’s use all available tools to uncover our origins, the history of our ancestors, and how we came to be in the current state. But let’s use this knowledge wisely: As a source of strength and wellbeing, not as a source of hate that will contribute to the fragmentation of America. Remember, we must ultimately decide where we go from here.

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